

HUSSERL AND THE CRISIS OF PHILOSOPHY

What follows is a meditation on the crisis of philosophy as it manifests itself in the work of Edmund Husserl. If this meditation is to hold us onto the appropriate path to this crisis it has to be itself a philosophical meditation. Moreover, if philosophy is indeed in a state of crisis the meditation itself, in so far as it is philosophical, is in a state of crisis. It also means that since philosophical meditation is itself in a state of crisis, the way it holds onto the appropriate path to the crisis of philosophy is itself in a state of crisis. In so saying, we do not intend to burden Husserl's work if only because it is already burdened. His work, in so far as it is attentive to the crisis of philosophy, is itself symptomatic of this crisis. As a philosopher, he cannot but be affected by this crisis, and neither can we to the extent that we are philosophers. It is a crisis in the community of philosophers. Thus, we are a part of the crisis that is the subject of our meditation. The crisis of philosophy is the crisis of our existence.

The inquiry into the crisis of philosophy, for Husserl, was an essential, if not, the essential theme of philosophy. This theme occupied him up to the time of his death and, to my knowledge, at the time of his death, he had not succeeded in fully articulating let alone rescuing philosophy from this crisis. He died the same way that Socrates died: leaving the task of philosophy unfinished. Perhaps, this is the manner in which all philosophers are destined to die. Our forerunners in philosophy have left this task unfinished not because, as individuals, they were incapable of bringing philosophy to a completion, but because it is in the very nature of philosophy to be unfinished. Just as Socrates left the task of philosophy unfinished, so did Husserl. We, too, should not have any illusion about the task ahead of us. We, too, will die with our philosophical task unfinished, and if there are others after us, they, too, will inherit the task and die in the same condition. To philosophize is to be a part of this relay race. We are called forth to play our part. Every generation must play its part, for no generation can play the part of any other generation. The fact that every generation must play its part does, not, however, mean that each generation stands in isolation from other generations. Each generation is anticipated by the previous ones, and anticipates future generations. That is, each generation remains extended into the past and into the future. The crisis of philosophy is what it is in the

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context of the past and the future horizons. An understanding of the crisis of philosophy, therefore, necessitates a meditation on the history of philosophy. Moreover, if we are to understand this crisis in its uniqueness, that is, as a philosophical crisis, the history of philosophy must be understood philosophically. That is, the history of philosophy must at the same time be the philosophy of history. In part this means that history remains unfinished. To this extent, history is not entirely synonymous with the past. The past extends itself into the present, and into the future. It is in this context that we are to meditate on the crisis of philosophy as it manifests itself in the work of Husserl. There is no imposition in placing his work in this context. His work necessitates this placing. It is he who tells us:

Every philosopher "takes something from the history" of past philosophers, from past philosophical writings – just as he has at his disposal, from the present philosophical environment, the works that have most recently been added and put into circulation, takes up those that have just appeared, and, what is possible only in the case (of the present), makes more or less use of the possibility of entering into a personal exchange of ideas with still living fellow philosophers.¹

The intelligibility of the crisis of philosophy presupposes intelligibility of philosophy. Such intelligibility, as we have seen, is possible only in the context of the history of philosophy and in the context of the philosophy of history. For Husserl, the history that is at stake is none other than the Greco-European history. It is Husserl's view that philosophy exhibits and exemplifies the distinguishing feature of the Greco-European

humanity, thereby, setting this segment of humanity apart from other segments of humanity. We must also bear in mind that, for Husserl, Greece and Europe, in this context, do not refer to geographical phenomena. In regard to Europe he tells us

... we refer to Europe not as it is understood geographically as on a map, as if thereby the group of people who live together in this territory would define humanity. In the spiritual sense the English Dominions, the United States, etc., clearly belong to Europe, whereas Eskimos, or Indians presented as curiosity at fairs, or Gypsies who constantly wander about Europe, do not. Here the title "Europe" clearly refers to the Unity of spiritual life, activity and creation, with all its ends, interests and cares, endeavors, with its products of purposive activity, institutions and organizations.²

Accordingly, the multiplicity of nations in Europe and of the nations consisting of the descendants of Europeans in other geographical regions of the world should not obscure the spiritual unity of Europe and of Europeans. Husserl asserts that:

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No matter how hostile they may be towards one another, the European nations nevertheless have a particular inner kinship of spirit, which runs through them all, transcending national differences. There is something like a sibling relationship, which gives all of us in this sphere the consciousness of homeland.³

Thus, for Husserl, philosophy is a unique form of spiritual life that animates European humanity. Other segments of humanity may exhibit other forms of spiritual life but none of these forms are philosophical. Moreover, the philosophical sense of being spiritual is not only to be distinguished from the sense of being spiritual in other segments of humanity, but also it is to be distinguished from other senses of being spiritual in the European segment of humanity. As is evidenced in his work, Husserl was aware of the actual and possible ambiguity of spiritual life.

In the European tradition there is a view in which what is spiritual is contrasted to what is material. Husserl pointed out how this dualism had given rise to an autonomous science of the spirit (rationalism/intellectualism), and to an autonomous science of the physical (natural science). He brought to our attention how each branch sought to dominate the other, and thereby create philosophy in its image. Reminding us that it is essential for philosophy to retain its autonomy if it is to be true to itself, he pointed out that this dualism could not be fully understood except on the basis of a more basic experience of unified spirituality. To Husserl this basic experience of spirituality was the very essence of philosophy and, in its duality and the opposition therein dissolves. He tells us that

it is forgotten that natural science (like all science as such) is a title for spiritual activities, those of natural scientists in cooperation with each other; as such, these activities belong, as do all spiritual occurrences, to the realm of what should be explained by means of a science of the spirit.⁴

To determine what is philosophically spiritual Husserl abandoned modernity with its spiritual-physical dichotomy and, to a certain extent, sought refuge in the Greek understanding of spirituality. It is his view that it is the Greeks who provided Europeans with a criterion for what is philosophically spiritual. It is with the Greeks that spirituality, for the first time in the history of mankind, becomes philosophical. The historic event set the Greeks apart from all other segments of humanity and, with the hellenization of Europe, Europe herself became the bearer of this historic event. Thereby, Europe was set apart from all other segments of humanity. In the Vienna lecture Husserl tells us

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spiritual Europe has a birthplace. By this I mean not a geographical birthplace in one land, though this is also true, but rather a spiritual birth place in a nation or in individual men and human groups of this nation. It is the ancient Greek nation in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Here there arises a new sort of attitude of individuals towards their surrounding world. And its consequence is the breakthrough of a completely new sort of spiritual structure, rapidly growing into a systematically self-enclosed cultural form: the Greeks called it philosophy.⁵

What Europeans became through the Greeks was not and is not simply one form of humanity among other forms of humanity – one anthropological type among other anthropological types. They became a distinctively new form of humanity that, in the course of its history, became the bearer of what is essential about humanity as such. For Husserl, it is philosophy that constitutes the essence of this humanity. Philosophy becomes the innermost telos of European humanity, and through European humanity all humanity.

Husserl is not alone in holding this view. A good number of European philosophers share this view. Heidegger, for example, states, “Philosophy is Greek in its nature”.⁶ And putting this statement in a historical context he says

The statement that philosophy is in its nature Greek says nothing more than that the West and Europe, and only these, are in the innermost course of their history, originally, philosophical”.⁷

Husserl was sensitive to the charge that by adopting this view he was embarking on a path that would be regarded by others as chauvinistic. In the light of his understanding of the nature and history of philosophy he points out

Here we encounter an obvious objection: philosophy, the essence of the Greeks, is not something peculiar to them which came into the world for the first time with them. After all, they themselves tell of the wise Egyptians, Babylonians, etc., and did in fact learn from them. Today we have a plethora of works about Indian philosophy, Chinese philosophy, etc., in which these are placed on a plane with Greek philosophy and are taken as merely different historical forms under one and the same idea of culture. Naturally, common features are not lacking. Nevertheless, one must not allow the merely morphologically general features to hide the intentional depths so that one becomes blind to the most essential differences of principle.⁸

To Husserl, that which takes place outside the Greco-European cultural surrounding – the surrounding that is the proper home of the nature and the history of philosophy is to be understood in a mythico-religious and practical cultural context – the same kind of context that the Greeks and

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the Europeans found themselves in prior to the emergence of philosophy. Philosophical hermeneutics is essentially Greco-European, and is both meaningful and fruitful only in the Greco-European context. Again, we are reminded by Husserl that it is only in this context that

man becomes a non-participating spectator, surveyor of the world; he becomes a philosopher; or rather, from this point on his life becomes receptive to motivations which are possible only in this attitude, motivations for new sort of goals for thought and methods through which, finally, philosophy comes to be and he becomes a philosopher.⁹

As has already been pointed out, Husserl is not alone in holding this view. The historiography of philosophy in the West, for the most part, supports this view. There is hardly a text in the history of Western philosophy that does not reinforce this view, at least, indirectly. The conventional view in the West is that the course of this history is the innermost course of Western civilization. The sciences themselves are by-products of this history. If we bear in mind that, for Husserl, the West is synonymous with Europe, it becomes evident that the course of the history of philosophy is the course of European humanity. Thus, it is not accidental that, for Husserl, the crisis of philosophy is the crisis of European humanity in its essential sense. The history of philosophy is the autobiography of the European man. It is the theater for the manifestation of this crisis. Husserl observes

... the crisis of philosophy implies the crisis of all modern sciences as members of the philosophical universe: at first a latent, then a more prominent crisis of the European humanity itself in the total meaningfulness of its total “existenz”.¹⁰

In bio-medical discourse life is said to be in a state of crisis when it is threatened by the possibility of extinction. That which gives rise to the possibility of extinction is sickness. Thus, the crisis of the European man manifests itself in the sickness of the European man. That is, the European man is sick. European

philosophy is symptomatic of this sickness. A proper diagnosis of the sickness calls for a rethinking of the crisis that is symptomatic of this sickness. What is to be understood as “biomedical” must be subjected to a philosophical investigation if only because, in its modern sense, this notion fails to call our attention to the primordial soil in which humankind is rooted.

If our meditation has all along been close to Husserl’s work, the European life that is in a state of crisis is not life as understood in biological sciences, nor is the crisis of life to be understood within the

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parameters of these sciences. These sciences and their mode of understanding are themselves a part of life-crisis. The life at stake is philosophical life, and strictly understood, the crisis is the crisis of philosophical life. By philosophical life, we are not to understand a life that has its exclusive locus in an academic environment. Such an environment is one of the many loci in which there is a possibility for the emergence of philosophy. By philosophical life, what Husserl has in mind is that life in which what is essential about being human is manifested.

If “crisis” is a medical term, a medical science appropriate to spiritual life is what is needed. What Husserl has in mind is not psychology or religion. The true science of the spirit is neither of these. It is philosophy. This is the medical science that was ushered into the history of mankind, for the first time, by the Greeks. Essential to the crisis of the European man is the forgetfulness of this science and the failure to put it on the forefront of the history of the humanity of man. It is only such a science that can restore and preserve health in the European man. It is the true humanistic science – the science that remains buried in the European scientism. In the Vienna lecture, Husserl observes

Blinded by naturalism (no matter how they attack it verbally), the humanists have totally failed even to pose the problem of a universal and pure humanistic science and to inquire after a theory of the essence of the spirit purely as spirit which would pursue what is unconditionally universal, by way of elements and laws, in the spiritual sphere, with the purpose of proceeding from there to scientific explanation in an absolutely final sense.¹¹

Genuine humanistic science, that is, philosophy, has been obfuscated by naturalism. Naturalism has generated a polarity between itself and spiritualism and regards this polarity as fundamental. In so doing, it has concealed its own spirituality Husserl says

For true nature in the sense of natural science is a product of the spirit that investigates nature and, thus, presupposes the science of the spirit. The spirit is by its essence capable of practicing self-knowledge and as scientific spirit it is capable of practicing scientific self-knowledge and, this, in an iterative way.¹²

What the Greeks revealed as fundamental to spiritual life, i.e., to philosophical life, is rationality. For them, it is rationality that sets man apart as man. As heir of the Greeks, the European man is in a state of crisis because his life has lost track of its innermost telos – the realization of rational culture. His history has been the history of this loss. Husserl says

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Precisely, this lack of genuine rationality on all sides is the source of man’s unbearable lack of clarity about his own existence and his infinite tasks.¹³

The loss however is not a total loss. If it were a total loss man would, then, a human being would be cut off from his or her essence as a rational being and, strictly speaking, there would be no consciousness of the loss as a loss. Husserl points out

The failure of a rational culture, however, as we said, lies not in the essence of rationalism itself, but solely in its being rendered superficial in its entanglement in “naturalism” and “objectivism”.¹⁴

The superficiality of the rationalism under whose domination man lives is so deep that, for the most part, it no longer appears superficial. Hence, Husserl calls for a rigorous scientific philosophy – the only type of philosophy that exposes this superficiality and that opens up the possibility of rescuing man from the crisis that threatens his very being. It must be born in mind that the crisis that threatens man is not, primarily, the crisis of the sciences or a social, political or economic crisis. It is not even the threat of nuclear annihilation. These crises are derivative and so are their resolutions. As it has already been indicated, the crisis is essentially philosophical and, as such, only a philosophical rescue can terminate it.

Because philosophical rescue involves the rescue of man qua man, for Husserl, philosophers, thereby, become functionaries of mankind. He remarks

The quite personal responsibility of our own true being as philosophers, our inner vocation bears within itself at the same time the responsibility for the true being of mankind; the latter is necessarily, being towards a telos and can only come to realization, if at all, through philosophy, through us, if we are philosophers in all seriousness.¹⁵

In being functionaries of mankind, we are also functionaries of ourselves for, we too, belong to mankind. The crisis of mankind is also a personal crisis for us. It is only when the crisis of mankind is grasped as a personal crisis and when a personal crisis is grasped as a crisis of mankind that what truly afflicts us can truly be philosophically comprehended. If we are to be rescued at all, or differently stated, if we are to rescue ourselves this is the kind of comprehension that should guide us. It is also the kind of comprehension that we must bring to bear on the work of Husserl. This work must itself be opened up in the light of this comprehension.

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It is Husserl's contention that thinking rigorously is an essential if not the essential mode of philosophical thinking. Applying this criterion of what constitutes philosophical thinking we can now focus attention on Husserl's philosophical thinking on the crisis of philosophy. It is essential that we ask whether Husserl's comprehension of the crisis of philosophy is a result of rigorous thinking. Has he rigorously thought through the crisis of philosophy both in regard to the nature and history of philosophy? How rigorous is the rigor that he brings into thinking about philosophy? What about his claim that philosophy appeared for the first time in the history of mankind in Greece. What about his claim that Europe and Europe alone has been the essential bearer of philosophy? In short, what about his comprehension of the history of philosophy? Is it a philosophical comprehension, or is it merely another form of cultural anthropologism? By placing the crisis of philosophy in the context of this history, does he have an adequate comprehension of this crisis? In equating the crisis of philosophy with the crisis of European man, is the crisis of humanity thereby adequately comprehended? In short, does he manifest an adequate understanding of philosophy? And how is adequacy to be determined and understood? To say that adequacy must be determined and understood philosophically begs the question for even if the determination and understanding must be philosophical what is philosophical is precisely what is at issue. As I have already indicated the crisis of philosophy cannot be understood let alone be resolved unless what philosophy itself is, is rendered intelligible. To say that philosophy constitutes that which is unique to man qua man, and that this uniqueness manifests itself in the life of reason, likewise, begs the question for what is meant by the life of reason is itself what must be clarified. Surely, if the question as to what philosophy is, is answered by saying that philosophy is rational life, and if the question is asked as to what rational life is, is answered by saying that rational life is philosophical life, we are in the presence of a vicious circle. This way of presenting the issue fails to bring intelligibility to what philosophy is, and thereby, to the crisis of philosophy. The history of philosophy, as is the case with philosophy of history, is equally rendered unintelligible.

Without philosophical intelligibility how can it be determined that philosophy manifested itself in Greece for the first time in the history of mankind? How can philosophical sense be made out of the claim that Europe and Europe alone has been the essential bearer of philosophy? What about the claim that the crisis of philosophy is the crisis of the European man? Do these claims rest on an adequate understanding of

philosophy? And how is adequacy to be determined and understood in a manner that does not confine us to a vicious circle? These questions are raised not to indicate that Husserl's thought is uneventful or that it is philosophically marginal. They are raised precisely because his thinking, as is the case with Western thinking generally, is eventful. The questions are intended to put Husserl's work in a dialogical context – a context that, in the elemental sense, is global rather than merely Western. They are consistent with Husserl's own thought that asks us not to absolutize any point of view and here, we add, not even if it is a Western point of view. At most, the questions are intended to explore the possibility of a philosophical dialogue between the Greco-European humanity and the rest of the humanity. They are also intended to help us determine where the true locus of the crisis of philosophy lies. What philosophy is or the crisis that besets it can no longer be considered an issue exclusively internal to the West. Gone are the days when what is philosophical was exclusively determined by the West. Perhaps, today, what the crisis of philosophy is, lies in part in what is construed as the distinction between European humanity and the rest of the humanity. Hitherto, philosophy has been conceived in the West in the manner that generated and sustained this distinction. Perhaps, herein lies the real crisis of Western philosophy: the generation and the sustenance of this distinction and the blocking by the West of the dialogue between Western segment of humanity and the rest of the segments of humanity. Although Husserl's effort to clarify the nature and the extent of the crisis facing philosophy is problematic, at least, it can be said that, in part, he has succeeded in awakening interest in the inquiry into the nature of this crisis.

Although what I have characterized as the real crisis may not appear as such in Husserl's thought or in European thought in general, it is so from a non-European perspective. European humanity can no longer deny this perspective, or take it for granted. In vain European humanity attempts to clarify its existence irrespective of and at the expense of the rest of humanity. Although it appears as a truism, European humanity remains inextricably bound to the rest of humanity, and it is the examination of this inextricable boundedness that should be the focus of the crisis of philosophy. Such an examination can no longer be the exclusive concern of philosophers in the European segment of humanity. To the extent that philosophy addresses what is the innermost sense of the humanity of human beings, no human being, no segment of human being, is to be regarded as inessential. Above all, what is called for is a dialogue in which all segments of humankind are parties.

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The possibility of a philosophical dialogue between European and non-European humanity calls forth for a rethinking of both European and non-European humanity regarding the possibility and actuality of philosophical thinking. A re-thinking of the European philosophy of history and of the European history of philosophy must be undertaken either as a pre-requisite of this dialogue, or in the course of it. Such a re-thinking will out of necessity involve a rethinking of the European thinking about the place of Greek philosophy in the history of philosophy and, specifically, the place of Greek philosophy in the history of European history of philosophy and in the European philosophy of history. It must also take into account the Greek thinking about Greek philosophy. It should not be assumed that what the Greeks thought about their philosophy is what Europeans think about it. If the re-thinking is itself philosophical and aims at nothing short of the truth of philosophy, and of the truth of the history of philosophy, and such truth is made manifest, the truth of the truth of the European conception of the origin of philosophy and of the European conception of the history of philosophy and of the European conception of philosophy of history will thereby be made manifest.

If, as the representative of European philosophy, Husserl claims that Greece is the soil from which philosophy emerges for the first time in the history of mankind the truth of philosophy, and, hence, of the history of the truth of this philosophy will reveal whether this claim is true. Here, we must bear in mind that the truth of philosophy is not necessarily identical with the truth of philosophy as it has been conceived of by Europeans up to this time. What is more likely is that the truth of philosophy has concealed itself from European humanity in so far as this segment of humanity has claimed the monopoly of this truth. Once the true truth of philosophy has been made manifest the truth of philosophy will also help us determine whether the claim is

Greco-European or is merely an invention of Europeans that is falsely attributed to the Greeks by Europeans and later to themselves. Here, philosophical caution is in order.

We should not assume the truth that we want to discover. It cannot be determined a priori that Greece is the birthplace of philosophy. It is a dis-service to philosophy if the historical origin of philosophy is not determined in the light of philosophy. Likewise, it must not be determined a priori that Greece is not the birthplace of philosophy. The determination of the birth of philosophy cannot be established without first determining what philosophy is. It is not possible to determine its birthplace without knowing what it is being born. An essential issue here which is itself

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philosophical, is to make this determination without preconceptions. We must allow philosophy to speak to us about itself. And since philosophy can only speak through us, we are not to interfere with it as it speaks to us through us. Although man speaks and in so doing, he is, for the most part, the master of what he speaks about, in speaking about philosophy he must allow himself to be mastered by philosophy so that he can truthfully speak about it. If the truth of philosophy is not mastered by motives external to philosophy the clarity of the historical origin of philosophy is more likely to emerge. If the historical origin of philosophy becomes truthfully manifest, so will the truth of philosophy itself for the intelligibility of the truth of the origin of philosophy be dependent on the intelligibility of the truth of philosophy itself. Because a human being is the being through whom and in whom philosophy comes into being and becomes intelligible, threat to the truth of philosophy lies in the being of man. In man and through man lies the danger of the truth of philosophy for in man there equally lies the danger of the truth of philosophy for in man there equally lies the means in which and through which untruth comes into being. In man and through man revelation and concealment are possible.

To my knowledge, it does not appear that the Greeks believed that it was through them that philosophy made itself manifest for the first time in the history of mankind. But even if it can be shown that they held this view, it does not necessarily follow that the view itself is philosophical. What the origin of philosophy is as in the case with what philosophy itself is, is not up to the Greeks. To the extent that the Greeks were philosophical they were philosophical on account of philosophy. Philosophy is not what it is on account of the Greeks. Thus, if the Greeks held the view that it was through them that philosophy made itself manifest for the first time in the history of mankind neither Europeans nor any other people for that matter should take this view for granted. What philosophy says about itself through us and in us is what should control. Since it does not appear that the Greeks held this view its occurrence in European philosophical tradition suggests that it may be an invention of the Europeans and what Europeans have done is to Europeanize the Greeks. Such an act is perhaps not out of European character for as evidenced in Modern European history, it appears to be part of the European mission to Europeanize non-Europeans. It cannot be assumed that human history itself is immune to this Europeanization. It should not be forgotten that, Hegel, a mainstream European philo-

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sopher, has taken the position that Europeans have a better understanding of the Greeks than the Greeks.

Towson University

NOTES

1 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, David Carr (trans.) (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), p. 392.

2. 2 Ibid., p. 273.

3. 3 Ibid., p. 274.

4. 4 Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, Quentin Lauer (trans.)

(New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), p. 154.

5 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, p. 276.

6 Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* Jean T. Wild and William Kluback (trans.) (New Haven: College and University Press, 1955), p. 31.

7. 7 Ibid., p. 31.

8. 8 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*,

pp. 279–80.

9. 9 Ibid., p. 285.

10. 10 Ibid., p. 12.

11. 11 Ibid., p. 273.

12. 12 Ibid., p. 297.

13. 13 Ibid., p. 297.

14. 14 Ibid., p. 299.

15. 15 Ibid., p. 17.